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NOTES ON FOLK-MEDICINE.

BY CHARLES BUNDY WILSON.

IN view of the fact that the matter that I am about to present may seem trivial, if not ridiculous, I wish at the outset to defend the dignity of the study of folk-medicine by quoting from an authority¹ on the subject.

"To collect odd phrases and scraps of folk-lore and string them together for the benefit of the curious is not to investigate folk-lore; it is rather to bring ill-deserved ridicule upon a study which has not for its object the pastime of a leisure hour, but the investigation of the greatest problem which man can solve — the growth of his mental faculties. If students of folk-lore had any less end in view, they could not ask for their pursuit serious consideration; and they would deserve neither sympathy nor assistance in their work. It is as a serious contribution to the history of man's life in this world from the dawn of his intellectual being that each work based on investigation of primitive habits and primitive phases of thought must be regarded. It does not appear to be vain to believe that by such inquiry there is more probability of ultimate knowledge of this difficult subject being reached, than by almost any other way, if it is possible, as I believe it is, to go back by the aid of folk-lore to ages, and, what is of more importance, to stages of life and thought which can otherwise in no way be reached."

The poet Schiller, too, must have recognized the dignity of the study of old customs when he wrote in his "Maria Stuart," —

Ein tiefer Sinn wohnt in den alten Bräuchen;
Man muss sie ehren.

The material for this paper was found in remedies preserved by German-Americans now living in eastern Iowa. Some of the remedies have been preserved by tradition, and others in a booklet, the exact title of which is as follows: —

Americanisches
Noth- und Hülf-Büchlein;
Enthaltend
Hausmittel und Recepte
für
allerley Krankheiten und Zufälle an Menschen und Vieh.
Hauptsächlich
aus den hinterlassenen Manuscripten eines zu seiner Zeit berühmten
gewesenen Arztes in Virginia gezogen.
Osnaburg, Stark County, Ohio;
Gedruckt und zu haben bey Heinrich Kurtz. 1837.

¹ Black, *Folk-Medicine: A Chapter in the History of Culture*, London, 1883, p. 214.

According to tradition, as related to me by Mr. William D. Lichty, of Johnson County, Iowa, Kurtz was formerly a German minister who lived in Pennsylvania. Through the kindness of Mr. Lichty, whose faith is strong and whose integrity is unquestioned, the writer has had access to a copy of this rare booklet, which is treasured almost as sacredly as the Bible. It has been worn by years of service and soiled by reverent hands. Not all the remedies in the collection can be classified under folk-medicine, for some probably have real medical value. They were widely used in western Pennsylvania seventy-five years ago, it is said, and there are some persons whose faith in them is still unshaken. They are so closely bound with the life of these people and their families that this fact has preserved them. The book was sacred to the owner's mother, and that in itself would keep the son's faith alive.

Among the early Germanic peoples the healing art was connected with religious rites, as the charms and incantations testify, and later there appeared the beginning of a science in the selection of herbs and simples, as is well known. A confusion of both methods may be seen in this collection of cures. I believe that many of these remedies, naïve as they may seem, have a direct bearing upon the history of thought and faith. Space will permit the selection of only a few that seem to have interest for students of folk-medicine. In the translation I have endeavored to preserve the simple style. What may be taken as an introduction is not a remedy for disease, but a preventive of disease.

HEALTH.

"Eat slowly. Always have on your table salt, pepper, parsley, sage, garlic, and a raw onion." Page 52.

NOSEBLEED.

Of the various cures for nosebleed the following are the most interesting:—

"Pull out hairs from under the arms of the one whose nose bleeds. Take an uneven number as three, five, seven, or nine, and hold them in the nose of the patient. The bleeding will stop at once." Page 18.

Note that the numbers are magic or mystic numbers. Hair seems to have had mysterious qualities. In the neighborhood of Worms¹ there is a belief that combed-out hair, if thrown on the highway, lays you open to witchcraft. In Swabia² there is a superstition that hair that is cut off must be burnt, or thrown into running water. If a bird carries it away, the person's hair will fall out. According to a belief in the western part of Scotland,³ if a bird used any human hair for building its nest, the person whose hair was used would become liable to headaches, and

¹ Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, tr. Stallybrass, London, 1882, vol. iv, p. 1799.

² *Ibid.* p. 1804.

³ Black, *Folk-Medicine*, p. 16.

ultimately become bald. This superstition has its explanation in the belief that the bird was an evil spirit or a witch. In Devonshire ¹ there is a belief that you can give a neighbor ague by burying a dead man's hair under his threshold. A Scotch ² cure for epilepsy is to bury cuttings of hair below the patient's bed. Magic lies in the hair according to Grimm; ³ consider the elf-lock and the elf-knot; witches have all their hair shaven off. To cure warts, ⁴ a common remedy was to tie as many knots on a hair as there were warts and throw the hair away. A German cherished ⁵ his hair as a visible sign of freedom. Among the Frisians men taking an oath touched their hair or beard. Grimm tells how those who were to be beheaded took measures to save from stain of blood their golden hair. It was a criminal offense ⁶ to let a slave's hair grow long. Black reports ⁷ that in Devonshire, and in Scotland, when a child has whooping-cough a hair is taken from its head, put between slices of bread and butter, and given to a dog. If in eating it the dog cough, the whooping-cough will be transferred to the animal, and the child go free. In some parts of Ireland, when one has been attacked with scarlet fever, some of the sick person's hair is cut off and passed down the throat of a donkey, which is supposed to receive the disease at once. Thomas ⁸ reports that in Asia Minor the hair of the dog which has bitten a man is used to cure the bite. All these beliefs and practices have an interest in their bearing upon the use of hair to cure bleeding of the nose. Other cures for nosebleed are as follows:—

"Hold a little dragon's blood (from a dragon-tree) in the hand awhile, and the nose will stop bleeding." Page 27.

"Take a fresh egg; open it on the large end and empty it. Fill the shell half full of blood, and then place it in hot ashes, but do not let any ashes get into the shell. As soon as the blood becomes hot and hard, the bleeding of the nose will gradually cease." Page 34.

"Burn cork; make it fine, and put it in the nose." Page 24.

Compare this last cure with the English belief ⁹ that cork has the power of keeping off cramp if placed between the sheets of one's bed. Sometimes cork garters are made by sewing together thin pieces of cork between two ribbons. As popular belief has established an association between nosebleed and love-sickness, the next remedy may appropriately be recorded with those just given.

INSANITY CAUSED BY LOVE.

"Melt a half ounce of saltpeter in a quart of well-water, and let the patient drink it when he is thirsty." Page 36.

¹ Black, *Folk-Medicine*, p. 27.

² *Ibid.* p. 172.

³ Vol. iv, p. 1631.

⁴ Black, p. 185.

⁵ Gummere, *Germanic Origins*, New York, 1892, pp. 59, 60.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 281.

⁷ Black, p. 35.

⁸ *Folk-Lore*, vol. xii, p. 191.

⁹ Black, p. 199.

HOMESICKNESS.

"Take a good charge of gunpowder, and sew it on the inside of the shirt near the neck of the one suffering with homesickness." Page 24.

The significance of gunpowder I have not been able to discover, but remedies are very often tied on or worn fastened around the arm, neck, or waist. Grimm¹ quotes many examples illustrating this practice. The apparent success of a much advertised "electric belt" is perhaps to be attributed to a lingering belief in the charm of the amulet.

MELANCHOLY.

"Take two handfuls of milfoil or yarrow, one dram of root of elecampane, and the same amount of sassafras, and steep them as you would tea. Drink this and continue the use of it. It is excellent." Page 37.

The emotions are indeed closely associated, and the sense of humor is not lacking in the temperament of the people who use these remedies, as the next cure for melancholy shows.

"Take root of elecampane, and cook it in pure wine, and then let it cool. Then place a piece of red hot steel in it so that the wine will become hot again. Take this drink as hot as possible, and continue repeating the dose. It will soon drive away melancholy." Page 1.

BEAUTY.

"Take common pulverized alum and the white of an egg. Beat them together, and then heat them. Apply this to the face for two or three days. Not only will freckles and wrinkles disappear, but the face will become beautiful and lovely." Page 10.

DIFFIDENCE.

"Take every morning in honey as much arum-root as will lie on the end of a case-knife, and continue its use for some time." Page 31.

Among the early Germanic races honey was prized far beyond any standard of our age, and finally bees² passed into religion and superstition. Honey became a precious thing among the Germanic gods, and it was the main ingredient of their drink.

DEAFNESS.

"Take a black radish; cut the top off as one cuts the top off a turnip; then dig out the inside like a turnip; put this on a china plate or platter, for pewter is not good. Mix salt with it, and then put it back into the shell of the radish; fasten the top on again, and let it stand twelve hours. Then take it out again; put it in a cloth, and squeeze the juice into a

¹ Vol. iv, p. 1173.

² Black, p. 39.

glass; put it in the sun; it will be ready for use in forty-eight hours. Place three or four drops in the ears every night." Page 13.

In considering the radish as a cure for deafness, it is interesting to note that it was likewise used to cause temporary deafness. In Cockayne's "Saxon Leechdoms," vol. ii, p. 343, advice ¹ is given somewhat as follows: "To escape a 'curtain lecture,' or to guard oneself against a woman's chatter, one should taste at night without other food a radish, and chatter will not be able to harm him." In Scotland and England ² it was the onion, not the radish, that was used to cure deafness. In the former country ants' eggs were mixed with the juice of onions and dropped into the ear. The use of ants' eggs may have some connection with the old Germanic custom of burying ³ diseases and remedies in an ant-hill.

WHITLOW.

"Bind on the letters LASVSRA." Page 17.

I do not know what this charm means. It is as obscure as one ⁴ for toothache used in Germany in the eighteenth century, which was as follows: Write either NAGWE or MAGRODUS with chalk on the table. If you write NAGWE, you must pierce every letter with a needle. If you write MAGRODUS, you must pierce every letter with a knife, and at each thrust ask the patient whether he feels anything. NAGWE is used when the upper teeth are affected, and MAGRODUS when the lower teeth are affected.

RHEUMATISM.

"Every evening, when you take off your shoes, place them upside down so that the heels and the soles will be up and the foot-opening down. Continue this a while." Page 1.

This remedy may be explained under the head of the transference of disease common not only in Germany but in Mexico, Ireland, Persia, and elsewhere. The idea is that the rheumatism is transferred to the floor or earth by turning the shoes upside down. In Thuringia, for instance, there is a belief that a rag or any small article touched by a sick person, and then hung on a bush, imparts the malady to any person who may touch this article in passing, and frees the sick man from the disease. May not the principles of contagious diseases be connected with this old belief? But in the case of contagious diseases the sick person in transferring the disease is not cured.

It has not been possible to make a historical investigation of all the cures presented in this brief paper, to say nothing of the whole series.

¹ Quoted by Black, p. 203.

² *Ibid.* p. 193.

³ Grimm, vol. iii, p. 1169.

⁴ *Beiträge zur Volkskunde, Festschrift für Karl Weinhold, Breslau, 1896, p. 113.*

Enough has been given, however, to indicate that there are problems, even in folk-medicine, still awaiting solution, and that the field is indeed rich. If we grant that folk-medicine is really an outgrowth of the sincere thoughts and devout beliefs of the minds of the masses, of the common faith of the common people, then it is not vain to hope that illustrations of man's mental history will be found by studying collections of classified facts, and that the investigation of things and superstitions that seem trivial, if not ridiculous, may after all be dignified and "not unworthy of systematic analysis."

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